

Real Human Connection: There is No App for That!

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the intersection of technology and the challenges that contemporary students face in managing their anxiety and forming social connections. College counseling centers across the country have seen a marked increase in students struggling with anxiety (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2017). We propose that this trend is intricately linked with technology: the bombardment of information from social media and news outlets can be overwhelming. While other generations certainly share in some of this experience, it is the current generation of college students that are affected most pointedly, having never lived in a world without texting, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. Broad suggestions for helping students navigate the unique challenges they face, drawing primarily on tenets of the person-centered theory developed by Carl Rogers are offered. The paradoxical remedy to the modern anxiety may be a return to a simpler, rather than a more complex strategy for intervention.

Technology is woven into the fabric of our society in an ever evolving manner. This phenomenon is neither inherently good nor bad,

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but the authors would hazard to say that there are consequences to such rapid and sweeping changes. In general, we are connected on a global scale: world events are streamed to phones, tablets and laptops. On college campuses, students are gazing into their smart phones with an expectant look that has become as ubiquitous as it is unique. The bombardment of information is continual, and at times, overwhelming. What is the consequence of this? A certain interpersonal disconnection is evident. The absence of non-verbal cues and emotional inflection lead to more shallow interactions (Lee, Leung, Lo, Xiong, & Wu, 2011). The current technological and informational explosion is unlike anything from the past. This is not the fault of this generation, who are immersed in this change--after all, previous generations have developed this technology.

Technological Twist to Anxiety and Coping

University faculty, staff, and administrators have worked to meet students in cyberspace; developing apps, learning platforms, and taking part in various social media. As well universities should—turning back the use of technology would be futile. The sun will rise in the east, water flows downhill, and students will interact on social media—these are inevitable facts. These efforts have had mixed results, however: Hung and Yuen (2010) report that when surveyed, students reported positive feelings toward learning experiences that included social networking as an adjunct to face-to-face class activities. Other researchers have reported that learning that took place solely on-line as opposed to face-to face was associated with a lack of a sense of community (Barbour & Plough, 2009), that participants were less satisfied in general and there was a dearth of emotional engagement (Mallen & Greene, 2003). In work done at counseling centers, Preschl, Maercker and Wagner (2011) found similar therapeutic gains occurred in group therapy on-line as compared to traditional in-person groups. Other researchers found some benefit to on-line delivery methods for therapy, but the gains were less robust than face to face therapy (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2009). Clearly there is promise to technology based interventions across venues, whether it is an adjunct to traditional methods or a standalone methodology, at the same time it is not a panacea, and there is much more research to be conducted.

In the past decade, according to a comprehensive survey by the American College Health Association (2015), anxiety has emerged as the chief concern of college students who seek help at university counseling centers across the country, hedging out depression, which still holds a prominent second place. In fact, 21% of women and 17% of men report experiencing at least one episode of overwhelming anxiety in the last year. Though this phenomenon is complex and only partially understood, what we do know is that students' coping resources are outstripped by the demands that they face. Anxiety, at its core, is our psychological and physiological reaction to a threat. Although anxiety has increased, there does not seem to be an increase in actual threats or stressors for students, but rather in the ability to manage them. It is the authors' assertion to look no further than social connectedness to find both the cause and the solution to this problem.

This anxiety is qualitatively different than simple worry—it has deeper, more existential roots: loneliness that is felt is pervasive and to the core of one's being as young adults struggle to find their place in the world (Berman, Weams, and Stickle (2006). Existential anxiety, in and of itself is nothing new—with Kierkegaard (1964) writing about it in some depth. It was, and is a universal constant of sorts. It arises as we come to realize that our life has no meaning beyond that which we give it. Similarly, but from a more developmental perspective, Erikson (1966) suggests that this period from late adolescence to early adulthood is a period of identity development; solidifying who you are essentially. The responsibility of these daunting task gives rise to great anxiety. An interesting and complicated twist is the intersection between this anxiety and technology. While the technology connects us, this connection may lack a certain depth (Lee et al., 2010). The habit of turning quickly to our technology when an uncomfortable feeling arises is well entrenched. Unfortunately, this does not just occur during our down time, but also during class, while driving, while walking, during exercise, when hanging out with friends . . . and the list goes on.

One of the dangers of online interactions on social media is that it can replace face-to-face communication. Research shows that face-to-face communication leads to an additional feeling of closeness compared to online communication (Lee et al., 2010; Mallen et al., 2003). Late night conversations in a study lounge, impromptu debates on the sidewalks, and simply being with friends has given way to

lightning fast strokes on touch screens. The ability to sit with others and even ourselves has declined. One of the primary ways in which we managed the existential anxiety of the past is through interpersonal support. The notion, that our relationships help us to manage the stresses and strains of living is well supported in the social science literature. For example, research has consistently found that there is a pretty compelling link between social connections and physical and mental health (Miki, Matheson, and Anisman, 2016; Thoits, 2011). In essence, people who reported having robust social relationships were healthier in a comprehensive sense.

Technology can interfere with the quality of our relationships but also helps us avoid sitting with uncomfortable emotions. Ironically, people report significantly less anxiety in on-line or other forms of electronic communication than they do when communicating in person (Shalom, Israeli, Markovitzky, & Lipsitz, 2015). On the other hand, this make intuitive sense, since most ways of managing anxiety require a confrontation of the anxiety in some fashion as opposed to simply avoiding it. Over the past few decades, the vital and diverse role that social support plays in our mental health has become well known: It serves to insulate us from mental health concerns. If adequate social support is present, students are able to manage life stressors, keeping them in check so they never become full-blown crises. And, when someone does experience a significant mental health concern, social support is associated with resiliency and the person connecting with the appropriate professional who can help them with their concerns (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Miki et al., 2005; Yakunina & Waehler, 2010).

The struggles faced by students are present across campuses throughout the nation. For instance, not long ago, two students, a man and a woman, were walking on a sidewalk in front of one of the authors. The young man began to say that he was thinking about dropping out of school. Just then there was an alert from the other student's phone. Without thought, she quickly attended to her phone. She turned back towards her friend and said, "What did you say?" He replied, "Oh nothing." These misses in communication have become far more common than they were a couple decades ago. Though it may seem like a distant memory when phones only hung on walls or sat on stands in houses, but this provided a boundary to such communication

that no longer exists, as carrying a phone throughout the day in all places has become the norm.

This is where the authors would argue that the university faculty and staff who lived in the era prior to instant communication have a responsibility. As noted earlier, it is previous generations, not the current cohort of students, who created this technological context. What can be offered to help students navigate life more effectively? Paradoxically, the authors assert that the answer to this problem is as simple as it is complex. First for the simple part: Make space for students to simply be—in the existential sense—to be with both others as well as with themselves. This work is underway at many institutions already. There is a trend across the nation to create learning spaces in libraries so that groups of students can meet and work collaboratively (Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013). Similarly with the growth of Living-Learning Communities in residence halls, students have been able to form meaningful social connections to other students as well as faculty (Workman, 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004).

Rogerian Theory in Practice

So much for the easy part, now on to the hard part—how do we facilitate these interpersonal as well as intrapersonal experiences? We have to intentionally build a culture on campus where students are mentored, valued, and prized. College counseling borrows heavily from the work of Carl Rogers (1986) which spanned more than four decades. Rogers' theory was heavily predicated on the formation of a relationship with others. The helper in the relationship must be genuine, congruent, and empathic. Also worth noting was that Rogers decided that his client-centered theory shifted to a broader person centered approach—beyond just therapy. Universities can examine a few of the key components to Rogers' theory as it applies to our work on campus: To begin with we must be in a relationship with students. This is where the intentionality starts. We have to foster real opportunities for mentorships between faculty and staff and students. It is tempting to shift advising functions on-line. Computer algorithms are great for determining graduation requirements, but there is no substitute for a face to face conversation to determine if the student has made a thoughtful decision about selecting a major. Having simply decided on a major does not mean that the career decision process is

complete, and premature career foreclosure on this process can be deleterious to students' academic progress as well as career trajectory (Cox, Krieshok, & Liu, 2016; Orndorff & Herr, 1997; Krieshok, 2001).

It would be great if class size would allow faculty to really know each student—but this is an ever-mounting challenge with budget constraints and pressures to grow enrollment. Between 2008 and 2015, all but three of the 50 states have decreased funding for higher education (Mitchell & Leachman, 2015). Having places where faculty, staff, and students can share space and interact in a casual fashion is important too. As noted earlier, many good changes are already underway with living/learning communities, such as more common space and organized social interactions. In fact, living/learning communities have been associated with higher retention rates (Buch & Spaulding, 2008) and increased student engagement in the university (Arms, Cabrera, & Brower, 2008). Though living/learning communities serve on-campus students well, what about students who do not have one of the identified special interest or who live off campus? The mentor relationship does not have to be the sage faculty who dispenses wisdom of the ages in the quad by the centuries-old oak tree. In reality, it is the clerk in the dining hall, who takes a little time to ask how a student's day is—and cares. It is the RA who stops by just to say 'hello.' Absolutely nothing in Rogers' theory dictates that the helper must be in a formal position of power. That being said, the president and the provost are not off the hook. Relationships take all forms.

Secondly, we must be genuine and congruent (Rodgers, 1986). The person in the helping role needs to have a genuine interest in the students and feel that they have something to offer within the helping relationship. The student, on the other hand, is incongruent; perhaps a bit anxious or unsure of themselves. The other part to this for the helper is that they must be genuine or true to themselves. We need to look for ways to be connected to students that feel natural to us. So often we put on a façade or assume a role of some sort. This is an impediment in really connecting with others. When who we are on the inside is who we are on the outside, forming real relationships is remarkably easy.

Next, we have to develop an empathic understanding for the students with whom we work and value them without condition

(Rogers, 1986). We have to not only care about our students, but we have to place ourselves in their shoes—as if we are them. It is critical here to not lose the ‘as if’ quality. This helps us to maintain our boundaries while respecting their autonomy. Being empathic does not mean that the student’s problem becomes our own. Similarly, having unconditional positive regard for them does not mean that we agree with everything they do, we just maintain our respect for their autonomy and for them as people.

Lastly, this empathic understanding must be communicated to the student (Rogers, 1986). This is actually one of the simpler aspects of this human equation. This is accomplished through a process of continually checking in. The relationship, in a sense, has to become part of the dialogue. Questions like, “How is this going?” and “Are we on the same page?” allow for a mutual evaluation and clarification of the relationship. In this way, the helper can emphasize their concern and caring for the student—even if this is not explicitly stated. This is a process of transparency. It is by no means necessary, and in fact is counterproductive, if the helper assumes the role of expert. The student is the expert in their own life—what has worked for the helper, may not work at all for the student. Remember, students likely have many people in their lives telling them what to do, and probably less than a few who truly listen.

Conclusion

Rather than to be prescriptive and give a list of specific things to do, in the spirit of the person-centered approach, a more flexible way of approaching the creation of a campus culture of real human connectedness was presented. In reality, every campus is unique—there are undoubtedly things that are done well (recognize and do more of them) and things that are not done so well (again, recognize these and look for ways to change). Being human is an ever-changing process—mistakes will be made in our roles as helpers, and that is OK. The more important thing is that we enter into the lives of students in effort to understand and mentor them. So, we know what to do—though we may need to remind ourselves—and by all means, put down the phone! Remember there is not an app for that.

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